"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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A Rural Church Program that Makes Religion the Qualifying Factor in Every Experience of Life

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By Eugene Smathers*

According to the Christian revelation, love is the law of life. Jesus taught that the true human life is grounded upon two eternal principles: love of God and love of neighbor. "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Paul expressed a similar conviction when he said, "Love is the fulfilling of the law." Love is the law of life and love can be realized only in a community of life. As Emil Brunner has said: "Man cannot be man 'by himself'; he can only be man in community. For love can only operate in community and only in this operation of love is man human."

A rural church program that would make religion the qualifying factor in every experience of life must endeavor to make conscious and Christian the inherent possibilities of community in rural life. Its goal will be the transformation of a collection of separate families, inter-related and interdependent by necessity, into a family of families, a community, consciously united and working together for mutual welfare. This goal has been expressed, in classic language, by the Apostle Paul: "For He, Christ, is the head and under Him, as the entire body is welded together and compacted by every joint with which it is supplied, the due activity of each part enables the body to grow and build itself up in love." (Ephesians 4:16, Moffatt) The rural church that would build a Christian community <u>will be to its community what the farm home is to the farm family</u>. This simple comparison is the unifying conception underlying the various suggestions for an adequate rural church program which I attempt to make in this paper. While on first thought the comparison seems commonplace, reflection will reveal it to be a creative and revolutionary conception of the function and task of the rural church.

Picture, in imagination, a well-kept farmstead. See the physical relationship of the house, its relationship to barn and fields. It is the radiating center of the family's manifold activities. And this relationship goes deeper than geography. For the better farm home is the center of the <u>whole life</u> of the family; <u>a cooperative enterprise</u> in which each member has a stake and in which each member makes his own diverse and distinctive contribution to the whole; <u>a miniature democracy</u> in which each counts for one and is accorded equal

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worth. In this complicated network of attitudes and relationships which compose family living, the children hold a place of highest importance. And the better farm home is concerned about the whole life of its members: body, mind, soul--food, clothing, shelter--education, economic and vocational opportunities, leisure, recreation--character, personality. This home is a basic source of attitudes and ideals and a fellowship in which each member finds security and moral support. It seeks to bring to its members every resource for the development of well-proportioned, abundant lives.

Again, my thesis is that the program of the rural church should seek to do for its community, or neighborhood, what the better rural home seeks to do for its members.

I. The Church Should Be The Unifying Center of the Whole Life of the Community.

In a life so compartmentalized and specialized as ours, even in rural America, there is need for some unifying philosophy and program. The church should be the one institution which can see life whole, and by bringing the will of God to bear upon that whole, become the unifying center of the various efforts for building the "Beloved Community." But the emphasis of a church program which seeks to be this unifying force in the whole life of its community will not be the aggrandizement of the church as an institution; rather the emphasis will be upon "the building up of the whole community in love." The controlling concern will be life rather than institutions, the means of life, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." This applies equally to the church as to so-called secular institutions. "Except a church lose itself for my sake, it shall not find itself unto life eternal." The church exists not for itself but to bring the holy and loving purposes of God to bear upon all the relationships and affairs of the community-family. As Carl C. Taylor has well said: "No social institution is an end in itself. Every item in the program of the church and every purpose it seeks to promote should be not for itself but for the community. The chief fault of the rural church of the past has been, and the abiding one of the sectarian church still is, that it looks upon the community as territory and population to be worked for the sake of building up the church rather than looking at the church as a working agency in the life of the community." Unless the rural church has this larger conception of its program, it will be a divisive influence and a hindrance to the realization of community.

I have been impressed increasingly by the Christian realism of the Catholic rural life movement with its emphasis upon "parish" rather than upon "church." It is my faith that in the long run the rural church itself will grow in proportion to the degree in which it loses itself in service to its community. Someone has said that the church should not only provide "services" for its people but also a channel of "service." I stress this point because the conception of the rural church as the "serving" center of its community is the keystone in any program which would make religion effective in all of life. Need I point out the implications of such a conception for inter-church relationships?

This Rural Church Program Will Be Concerned With ALL of Life.

In line with our prophetic-Christian heritage, there will be a recognition of the unity of body and soul, and there will be no attempt to abstract the individual from his community. The common contrasts between sacred and secular, between spiritual and material, will disappear in the inclusive truth that every aspect of life needs to be responsive to the sovereign will of

God. Such a program will reach every member of the community, young and old, tenant and owner, saint and sinner; touching each "on the plane of his natural and dominant interest"; offering something that each, regardless of station or spiritual attainment, will recognize and use. This means that no vital human interest or concern will be foreign to the province of the program of the rural church. And as is so often true of family life, the greatest concern and effort will be for the marginal members, recognizing that "all are bound together in the bundle of life"--that "a community is no stronger than its weakest family."

With this living sense of its community and this concern for all of life, the program of the rural church will not be confined to the four walls of the church building, even though much of its most effective work will be done here. From among the several commonly recognized functions of the church I would like to select two for brief mention, suggesting some modification in our common practice that these functions may be more closely integrated with the total life of the community.

A. The Public Worship of God. All of us will agree that one of the primary tasks of any church program is to provide opportunity for and leadership in the corporate worship of God. I do not propose to offer any detailed suggestions as to techniques by which the rural church may become more fruitful as a "community of worship," but I do want to make a suggestion regarding the content of our rural public worship. Our worship should "impart a significance to the daily round." The concerns of our common life need to be brought into the sanctuary and lifted into the light of the eternal purposes of God. Worship should "consecrate and illuminate with meaning the relations of family and neighborhood, recreation and friendship, and the various interests of common life." Not merely individual religious living, but all the concerns of community living have a place in the content of our services of worship. The religious life revolves around two centers: worship and work. Work without worship is blind and worship without work is empty. We cannot make conscious and Christian the inherent possibilities of community in rural life without worship, and equally our worship will be sterile unless it flowers out into Christian action in all areas of life. May I fortify this contention regarding the content of our rural worship with two quotations?

First, from an article on "The Cooperative Movement and the Liturgical Movement," by Dr. Virgil Michel, a Roman Catholic: "And here the lesson of history is that any movement toward Christian ideals, when fostered apart from all relation to Christ, will soon decline: it will, in spite of its manifest idealism, be of the earth earthy and will go the way of the flesh."

The other from a Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin, "The Kingdom of God and Rural Reconstruction," by Arthur T. Mosher: "Our hymns, our imagery in prayer and sermon, our liturgies, our devotional programs must mirror accurately and completely the broad outline of our Christian program....We cannot sustain and develop a Christian consciousness on the broad implications of stewardship and social morality by means of prayer and worship habits based largely on individual piety..."

"Our program must provide for establishing personal and group habits of prayer, worship, and group expression which explicitly state that the production of shoes, of food, of baskets, of cloth, of pottery, of ploughs is a service rendered to God through ministering to one's neighbor....Each Christian must be made to see, through its place in public worship, that the dedication of one's fields to the service of Christ is an integral part of acceptance of the Christian faith.....We cannot

build our ceremonies around a single phase of the Gospel, yet expect our presentation to result in an honest discipleship. If we want our program to present the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we must recast our ceremonies, our vocabulary, our hymns, our devotional practices, our orders of worship, until every implication of the full Gospel of Christ blossoms truly and logically out of the very devotional habits and worship literature of the people."

B. Evangelism. This is another well recognized task of any church, and again I would make only a brief suggestion regarding the content of our evangelistic message. Too often our evangelism has been entirely individualistic, implying that a person can be a Christian apart from the community in which he lives. If religion is to be the qualifying factor in all of life, if the Gospel has implications for every aspect of life, then we must not seek to win persons to it under false pretenses, but must boldly proclaim that the call of Christ is a call to His way of life, a call to contribute to the building of a Christian community.

II. The Rural Church Should Be A Real Christian Fellowship, A Community of Love, a family of God, each member a child of the King, thus giving him a sense of dignity and worth, a sense of belonging which is the essence of security. May I quote Dr. J. H. Oldham: "The church should be the place where barriers of race, nationality, class, sex and education are done away with, where the underprivileged, the down-trodden, the outcast and despised, find a welcome and feel themselves at home: a meeting-ground where those who are divided in questions of politics and economics can realize afresh their unity in loyalty to a common Lord, can discuss their differences in the reality of this fellowship and learn to understand one another. In the disintegration of social life the church ought to provide centers in which men can find protection, shelter and security in the care and love of their fellow men, and rediscover the meaning of community in the support and comradeship of a society the members of which bear one another's burdens and seek the good of all. The church ought also to be the place not only where support and encouragement are given to those who need them, but where the more robust and vigorous may find their individualism and self-will disciplined and tempered and their purposes purified and strengthened in a common endeavor to learn and fulfill the will of Christ." (The Church and Its Function in Society, p. 148)

III. The Program of The Church Should Help The Rural Community Become a Cooperative Enterprise in Which Each Individual and Family Has A Stake.

The motto of the Christian rural community is "all for each and each for all." Through all the reaches of its program the church will seek to encourage the spirit of mutual helpfulness and service, preaching community cooperation as the practical expression of the Christian law of love. We need to regain, in modern setting and application, the spirit and practice of the pioneer rural community, with its clearings and barn-raisings, and other activities of mutual helpfulness.

Before the church can help the community become a cooperative enterprise, it must have the cooperative spirit itself; it must practice what it preaches. And if there is more than one church in the community, the spirit of cooperation must be manifest between them before it will be manifested in the manifold relationships of community life. Through its program of worship, education and fellowship, the church must nurture those qualities which make for unity: allegiance to common ideals and objectives, mutual respect, tolerance, recognition of diversity and division of labor, loyalty to one's community, and faithfulness to one's

own task or function. It must also foster those human qualities which make for good relationships, which make cooperation and mutual helpfulness possible: integrity, honesty, dependability, humility, thrift, and kindred traits.

The church will seek to make the community a cooperative enterprise on behalf of children. A good farm home places the child at its center, so must the church program, seeking for every child the best possible life. The church will help its community to be child-centered and to work together to provide those surroundings in which children may grow into the beauty and fruitfulness of Christian manhood and womanhood. John Bennett, in his recent book, Christian Realism, makes this the criterion of a Christian society: "to give every child his due." "This means," he says, "that every child should have the opportunity to develop his capacities without the adventitious handicaps that are the result of the economic condition or social status of his parents." Later, he adds: "I have stressed the place of children in our social responsibility because in their case one can give full weight to the place of environment without falling into a false environmental determinism. The freedom to rise above all external circumstances can be attained, but we are not born with it, and the most impressionable years of our lives are those in which external circumstances are most decisive."

In the rural community, the family rather than the individual is the basic social unit, and the program of the church will be family-centered, assisting families to become more Christian and to fulfill their functions more adequately. This assistance will include preparation of youth for marriage and for Christian family life. There needs to be special help given to young families seeking to become established. Every worthy concern of the families of the community will be the concern of the church.

IV. A Rural Church Program Which Seeks To Make The Gospel Effective in All Experiences of Life Will Be Concerned With Every Need of Its Community.

It will endeavor to do whatever needs to be done for the welfare and development of the community, but will never attempt to re-do something that is already being done efficiently by other organizations or agencies. Though the church initiates an activity to meet a conscious need, it will withdraw whenever another agency, with a more specialized function and leadership, assumes responsibility. Always over and above what other agencies are doing or will do, there are needs which will be the province of the church. And when I say that the church program that would bring God's will to bear upon all of life will be concerned with every need of its community, I mean that quite literally--a concern not merely for what we call "spiritual needs," but for all the needs of all the people. It is true that "man does not live by bread alone," but he must have bread, and often he must have bread before he can have that which is "beyond bread." Time does not permit a cataloging of all the needs of the average rural community, nor of a detailed church program designed to meet them. But I would like to mention three areas in which need is usually found and make some general suggestions regarding a church program designed to make a contribution in each area.

A. Health. Increasingly, we are becoming aware of the relationship between physical and mental health and the response which persons can and will make to their church and community. Since the days of its Master, the church has been concerned with this area of life, believing that health and wholeness for every person are the purpose of God. The rural church needs to make health an element in its program, and where no other public agency is adequately meeting the need,

the church should sponsor and direct activities looking toward a more healthful community. These activities will include education in nutrition, promotion of home production of food, education in the principles of rural sanitation and encouragement in improvement of water supply, screening of houses and building of sanitary toilets, provision for immunization and quarantine. The church will cooperate with all agencies working for the improvement of the health of the area, and seek to harness the resources of national organizations to local need. Where medical services are inadequate or are beyond the reach of a majority of the people, the church will seek through cooperative endeavor to provide such care. This may take the form of a public health and medical program under the direction of a resident nurse, often subsidized by a Mission Board, as is being done in various disadvantaged communities over the nation. Or in larger communities, with more financial resources, it may take the form of a medical cooperative. Whatever the form, the church has a legitimate concern in the matter of the health of its community.

B. Recreation. This is an area of need in practically every rural community and so often all that the church does is to condemn the existing forms of recreation without doing anything to replace them with constructive and wholesome activities. With the invasion of our rural communities by roadhouses and other commercialized forms of amusement, and with the increasing mobility of our rural population, there is increasing need that the church awake to its responsibility in this area of life, and provide or help to provide a varied program of recreation for every age-level.

C. Economic Life. This is the basic problem in most rural communities, especially here in the South. Unless the rural church puts its shoulders under this burden, the future is dark, both for the people and for the church. Therefore, I would like to make some definite suggestions as to ways in which the rural church can assist in the solution of this vital problem, and by such assistance can bring the resources of Christian faith to bear upon a most important area of life:

1. Be Informed. The leadership of the rural church, both clerical and lay, but especially the clerical, should be informed about and cooperate with all the agencies designed to assist rural families improve their economic level. The least the church can do is to know and work with its allies in the struggle against rural poverty: the Agricultural Extension Service, the 4-H Club movement, State Colleges of Agriculture, the Soil Conservation Program, the Farm Security Administration, the Farm Credit Administration, and many other similar agencies, public and private. Church leaders should be informed regarding the activities of local and county Land Use Planning Committees, and when opportunity is presented, gladly serve on them. The Land Use Planning Program, in my opinion, is one of the most hopeful signs on the agricultural horizon, and the rural church has an important place in it.

2. Opportunity For Study. The rural church should provide opportunity for study of local problems and needs, not just for the sake of study but as the basis for definite action. Some of us, especially in the Appalachians, have found the "Study Club" technique, so successful in Nova Scotia, to be a most useful, though simple, method of study-for-action. There is a growing literature regarding this method of group study, so we need not go into detail here. Whether through study clubs, discussion groups, farmers' schools, homemakers' clubs, rural folk need opportunity to study their needs and resources, and the rural church should see that they have this opportunity.

3. Encourage Cooperatives. The rural church can and should encourage cooperatives as a practical method of solving many of the economic problems of its community and as an expression of the Christian spirit in the practical affairs of economic life. The type of cooperative will depend upon the local situation, whether a buying club, a credit union, a farm machinery association, a live stock improvement association, a farmers' producing and purchasing cooperative, a consumers' cooperative or some other. The Christian rural community will express the law of love through cooperation in all areas of its life. Every need that can be met by voluntary group action and with local resources will be met by the application of this democratic and Christian form of economic organization.

4. Opportunity For Youth. The rural church must seek to provide means by which some of the better youth may remain on the land and in the community. Of course, to the degree in which the church helps lift the total economic level of its community it is doing this. But aside from this general contribution to the problem of youth migration, the rural church should endeavor to make a more specific attack on this problem. The Church of the Latter Day Saints has much to teach us here and the Catholic rural life movement is beginning to make real progress along this line of endeavor. Here and there we find a rural Protestant church experimenting with possible contributions. It may be the simple method of using the church as a clearing-house between owners of land and young families who want to get established. It may be a community forest which will provide employment and raw materials thus giving young people an economic opportunity within their own community. It may be a church homestead project such as we are developing at Big Lick, which I think has real possibilities in communities that have undeveloped or abandoned lands. Or it may be through experiments in cooperative farming. Doubtless there are many other avenues being and yet to be explored by rural churches. But here is a crucial problem which the rural church dare not neglect. May I quote from an article by Dr. Henry S. Randolph, in The Missionary Review of the World:

"In rural America there are ten million youth. Many of these are disadvantaged through poverty. The government and other organizations are making their contribution, but if these young people are to be effectively restored and saved to the nation, their confidence, hope, ambition, aspiration, determination, pride and self-respect must be reconstructed. This is the task of the rural church, for there is no other institution that can undertake and carry through such a momentous responsibility. There is no other institution known to rural life that is so well fitted with philosophy, idealism and method to provide the needed sympathy and prophetic direction to complete rural living by disadvantaged youth of the soil as the Christian Church. The holy work of the rural church is to build out of these hopeless, spiritless lives, which poverty has strewn over this fair land of ours, youthful lives strong and true." I would like to add that the rural church cannot do this by words, by preaching, by passing resolutions; it must dare to act, to experiment, to fail and to adventure again.

V. The Program of The Rural Church Must Stress Continuously The Place and Importance of Stewardship in Christian Community Life.

This stewardship will be all-inclusive: stewardship of the soil and other natural resources, as the material foundation of continuing community life and as a trust from the Eternal God: stewardship of personal abilities--the responsibility of the Christian for developing latent talents and for using them for the advancement and welfare of the community; stewardship of time--the obligation to make

every moment count toward some creative or recreative task; as well as the common meaning which we attach to the word "stewardship" in connection with the church. The meaning and implications of this broad concept of stewardship have not been adequately explored by most rural churches. At this point, I would like to bear witness to the contribution of the "Lord's Acre Plan" to this all-inclusive kind of stewardship, even though it is easy to think of this plan only as a successful method of raising money for church expenses and benevolences.

I can list only two other elements of a rural church program which would make religion the qualifying factor in all of life and, though time forbids elaboration, they are of great importance.

VI. The Program of The Rural Church Should Dignify Rural Living By Keeping Before The Community The Values and Satisfactions Inherent in Rural Life. (1)

VII. And It Should Keep Its Community Aware of The Broader Ethical Implications of Agriculture and of Its Community Life.

No community liveth unto itself alone. The particular local community is a unit of the larger world community. The goal of the rural church is a Christian rural civilization.

Conclusion

This, in outline, is my conception of the essentials of a rural church program which would bring the resources of religion to bear upon all of life, or, expressed differently, which seeks to build a Christian rural community. The rural church should do for its community what the better rural home does for the family. This is a high ideal and a difficult task, but no lower ideal or no easier task will meet the demands of our times for making Christ the Lord of Life. It is my firm conviction that such a rural church program will not be approximated unless the rural minister is enabled, and personally determined, to remain in a community for a long term of years. Fly-by-night leadership can never develop such a program. Brief ministries may be able to build the church as an institution, but to build a Christian rural community requires consecutive leadership and effort over many years. The latter requires the kind of leadership which can be patient, as patient as the processes of Nature and the unfolding purposes of God.

Building Christian rural communities is a goal worthy of the best which the church can give. I can envision such communities being able to keep faith and to survive the shocks of a world seeking to destroy itself, keeping the light of Christianity and democracy burning in a blacked-out world, becoming "islands of brotherhood" in a sea of hatred and conflict. But this will not, nay, cannot be done by the people and their leaders unless they have, individually and together, at the foot of Calvary's Cross found that peace and power of God which save from self-righteousness and from despair.

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(1) Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin No. 46, "Enduring Values in Rural Life," quoting statements by notable rural leaders will be found helpful for the purpose. Price 5 cents.

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